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ABSTRACT

When it comes to "student-centered" teaching, who knows what teachers are talking about? Specifically, the multiple perspectives offered in today's diverse classrooms have rendered such terms slippery and subjective. In a student-centered classroom, to "be" the one who knows what the students are talking about, the writing teacher must first face towards his/her students, to determine who "they" really are, to listen to their voices and experiences, to then lead them into a place where their perspectives make up the center. A center that everyone can agree upon is probably not self-evident. What makes California's classrooms so diverse are the students' identities--ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation--and the students' abilities. Using California State Polytechnic University Pomona, this paper investigates the student population in the streets around the university. The paper explains that freshmen must take the English Placement Test (EPT) unless they qualify for exemption with an SAT Verbal score of 550 or above; the EPT is used to situate students by ability, which is one form of diversity. Noting that at the beginning of fall quarter 2001, Cal Poly Pomona remediated 51.39% of its first-time freshman population, the paper states that as a result these students were required to take either one or two basic writing courses, depending on their exact score. It finds that the game of "Who knows what we're talking about?" is about a diverse student population whose multiple perspectives are wonderfully layered and individual, and who, when validated, are willing to invite their teachers onto their streets. (Contains 5 figures. Cites 11 works.) (NKA)

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Multiple Perspectives. The Changing Faces of Student-Centered Teaching: Refiguring the Center.

by Kristy K. Hodson

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Presentation Delivered at the 53rd Annual CCCC
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Kristy K. Hodson *March 2002*

THE CHANGING FACES OF STUDENT-CENTERED TEACHING: REFIGURING THE CENTER

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

While I tended to my children one Saturday morning not too long ago, a cartoon played on TV. It was more background noise than entertainment until something caught my attention. One of the cartoon's characters was participating in a game show called "Who Knows What We're Talking About?" Almost immediately, I heard the game show's title as the cry of my students, students who are diverse and, because of this, have a lot to talk about, a lot to learn, and a lot to teach both each other and ourselves. But perhaps more to the point is the fact that this question speaks to a problem with student-centered teaching: frequently the terms "student" and "the center" are taken for granted. When it comes to student-centered teaching, who knows what we're talking about? As important as it is to try to answer this question, a definitive answer is itself the problem. Specifically, the multiple perspectives offered in today's diverse classrooms have rendered these terms slippery and subjective.

In a student-centered classroom, in order to *be* the one who knows what the students are talking about, the writing teacher must first face towards his or her students, to determine who *they* really are, to listen to their voices and experiences, in order to then lead them into a place where their perspectives make up the center. With this being true, we should begin by identifying who, in general, our students are, which means considering what we know and what we don't, in order to create the kind of classroom conditions that will allow multiple perspectives to become a catalyst for the kinds of dialogues our students need to succeed by most everyone's definition (Darder 136). Even so, a center that everyone can agree upon in our classrooms is probably not self-evident. By no

means can it be said that our students come to our classroom with a shared set of beliefs, experiences, voices, identities, and abilities that differ only in that they differ from ours. When I say that our students bring multiple perspectives, I do not mean in one or two ways; no, they are diverse in diverse ways. They have as much—probably more—to teach everyone in the classroom, including ourselves, as we have to teach them.

And in saying this, I know I speak for my co-presenters and colleagues. Even though our methods and theoretical perspectives may differ, even from each other, we are united in that we each have had to refigure the center of our student-centered classrooms. For each of us, the center shifts with each class we teach. Finding a new way to look at, to talk about, the center—perhaps by beginning with a shift in our language, from the definite article to the indefinite article (*a* center)—is, we think, worthwhile. Our students bring too much to our classrooms to risk marginalizing their identities and abilities in order to impose a supposedly equidistant center; their diversity has made "the center" a subjective place. The demands now are different from when we first learned the pedagogy of student-centered teaching. In realizing this, we have made some discoveries which we hope will be of interest to other writing teachers who find that their classrooms, too, have grown increasingly diverse.

So, in keeping with the theme of the conference, we each aim to connect "the text and the street." Recent census figures confirm that California is one of the most diverse places in the United States to live; we feel that the streets on which our students reside, the streets they take to get to and from the academy, reflect this diversity. These streets afford wonderful opportunities for enrichment, and they bring new challenges and revisions to the student-centered classroom defined by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky in Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts. According to their model,

> [a] course in reading and writing whose goal is to empower students must begin with silence, a silence students must fill. It cannot begin by telling

> students what to say. And it must provide a method to enable students to see what they have said—to see and characterize the acts of reading and writing represented by their discourse. [. . .] A course in reading and writing must, then, provide students with a place to begin [. . .]. (7)

When we began our teaching careers, many of us probably encountered this canonical definition of student-centered teaching. While this definition still resonates, we do think that some of what we espouse might seem contrary because, in order to make our diverse writing classrooms the kinds of classrooms Bartholomae and Petrosky envision in our eleven short weeks together, we argue that the writing teacher should exert a bit more authority than perhaps Bartholomae and Petrosky would be comfortable with.

As we collaborated on this presentation, we began by determining what we think makes our classrooms wonderfully and exhaustingly diverse. What emerged from our individual narratives were two distinct features: our students' identities—ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation—and our students' abilities. (Time constraints have forced us to limit our examination of identity to the area we find most significant in *our* classrooms: ethnic identity.) Yet even our students' identities and abilities are themselves diversified and changing, which means that generalizations about a few perspectives in these areas actually conceal a myriad of perspectives. But even in saying this, I must begin by referring to some general statistics about our students' identities and abilities in order to explain why we think the concept of student-centered teaching raises some questions.

With this being said, the "streets" where Cal Poly Pomona students reside—both in terms of identity and ability—resemble the streets where other college freshmen from our representative regions live. So we use California State Polytechnic University, Pomona as our example. We encourage you to consider the ways the streets surrounding

other freshman writing classes throughout the rest of the United States are similar—and different—and how this reality has invited all of us to refigure the center.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in the year 2000, 46.7% of Californians identified themselves as "white" (see Figure 1). For the entire United States, this percentage is larger: 69.1%. In California, 10.9% identify themselves as Asian, while this number is only 3.6% for the nation as a whole. The ratio is similar for those who identify themselves as of Hispanic or Latino origin: 32.4% in California; 12.5% in the United States. Of course we realize that these numbers represent the population in general, not the population of college-enrollees and that one's ethnic identity cannot fully account for one's decision to attend college. Nevertheless, we think that these numbers are interesting to consider because an even greater degree of diversity is reflected in the student population at Cal Poly Pomona.

In the same year (2000), the number of self-identified "white" Americans at Cal Poly Pomona was only 31%, a decrease of 15% from California's population in general (compare Figure 1 to Figure 4). Similarly, the number of self-identified Asian students at Cal Poly Pomona was almost three times the number represented in California's general population and almost ten times the number in the U.S. (CPU: 30.6%; CA: 10.9%; US: 3.6%).

When we compare the ethnicity breakdown of nationwide college enrollment to some of the students within the entire California State University system to that of Cal Poly Pomona, one campus within that system, a similar picture emerges (compare Figures 2, 3, and 4). What these figures say to us, in generalized terms, is that California is ethnically diverse when compared to the rest of the nation, and Cal Poly Pomona's enrollment, in terms of percentages, reflects this diversity to an even greater extent. With the exception of "white" and African-American students, the ethnicity percentages of Cal Poly Pomona's students noticeably increase from that of the entire CSU system. Note,

too, the nearly 40% differential in self-identified "white" students from nationwide enrollment (70.8%) to Cal Poly's enrollment (31%). The most striking increase is in the number of college-enrolled Asian students (Nationwide: 5.9%; CSU: 15.3%; CPU 30.6%). The problem is that the term "Asian" can be applied to someone who is Chinese, Thai, Korean, Indian, Taiwanese, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Japanese, and so on, not to mention various combinations thereof. The same kind of diversity exists for Hispanics, as well as for those of mixed ethnicity. The point is that these percentages, in reality, are not nearly so tidy. In general, these numbers do account for the ethnic perspectives brought to our classroom, yet it's exciting to consider that the breakdown is even richer than the way it looks on paper. We can assume that other colleges in the surrounding region report similar numbers, as well as similar realities obscured by the numbers.

So our students' identities bring a unique and always changing set of challenges and rewards. The same might be said of our students' abilities, for this is the other key feature of our diverse classrooms. Before going any further, we wish to clarify that we are *not* arguing in favor of any sort of causal relationship between identity and ability. If there is a relationship, we have chosen not to explore it. There's just too much at stake: Besides the risk of perpetuating stereotypes, we fear that a pedagogy which suggests a causal relationship could lead students to see their identities as roadblocks on a "one-way-and-one-way-only" highway to the academy. Instead, we think that their identities, when validated and centralized, can be their vehicle to academic fluency; and when they're invited to drive their own cars, they can determine the streets to take, how long to stay, and for what purposes.

Nevertheless, varying levels of ability—from "basic" writers to students who have tested into entry-level freshman composition—have changed how we, as teachers trained in student-centered teaching, face the center. Freshmen who wish to enroll in any

Cal State University must take what is called the English Placement Test (EPT), unless they qualify for exemption such as by an SAT Verbal score of 550 or higher. The EPT is described in CSU's literature as being "a placement test, not an achievement test or a specific diagnostic exam" (Noreen, "CSU Focus on English" 5). I mention the EPT because it's a test used to situate students by ability, which is one form of diversity. Ironically, though, this form of testing essentially conceals other forms of diversity, such as ethnicity. But once students are situated in a classroom by ability, then the other points of diversity reassert themselves.

The English Placement Test:

> consists of a sixty-minute multiple-choice section and a forty-five minute essay. The multiple-choice section has two subsections: reading skills and composing skills. The essay portion of the test requires students to read a brief prompt about a general topic or issue; they must then take and explain a position, drawing upon personal experience, observation, or reading. (Noreen, "CSU Focus on English" 5)

The essay segment of the EPT is read and scored holistically by two different readers, each assessing the essay for clarity of thought, precision of language, fluency, organization, and development (Noreen, "CSU Focus on English" 8). In order for students to test into entry-level freshmen composition, they must earn an EPT score of 151 or higher (see Figure 5). A score ranging from 142 to 150 requires that the student enroll in one pre-baccalaureate developmental writing course; a score below 142 requires two consecutive pre-baccalaureate developmental writing courses before that student is said to be ready for college-level freshman composition.

At the beginning of fall quarter 2001, Cal Poly Pomona remediated 51.39% of its first-time freshman population (Fall 2001 Freshman Remediation: Pomona). This means that 51.39% scored below 151 on the EPT, and as a result were required to take either one

or two basic writing courses, depending on their exact score. Additional non-published statistics from Cal Poly's English department, which compare EPT results from 1988 through 2001, reveal that the highest percentage of scores almost always fall in one of two categories: scores ranging from 120 to 141 and scores higher than 151; in other words, those who place into freshman composition and those who place not one, but *two* developmental courses below that level.

In the same way that our students' ethnic identities diversify our classrooms, so too do their varying levels of ability. The statistical breakdown of our students' EPT scores hints at the way these figures, too, should be used only to make generalizations. Just as the term "Asian" can apply to several individuals, each of whom will define this label differently, the terms "basic writer" and "college-level writer," in our experience, are similarly stratified.

There are a few practical reasons for this: 1) EPT scores have been manipulated by a few points here and there throughout the years. For example, in my first year of teaching in the CSU system, a score of 147 or higher was sufficient to enroll in freshman composition, even though today that same score would place a student in the second of two basic writing courses; 2) The range of ability, regardless of what students' placement scores say, is vast. A student who scores 100 on the EPT and a student who scores 141 are placed in the same basic writing course. Similarly, it's not uncommon to have a student in a basic writing course who *missed* the cut-off into freshman composition by one point, yet is in a second-level basic writing class where several of the other students *made it into* the class by only one point; 3) Lastly, we cannot overlook the flaws inherent in any sort of standardized test: Some students just do not score according to their ability; sometimes all the right conditions exist for an individual student to have a successful writing experience, and sometimes they don't; sometimes students have control over this, and sometimes they don't.

Still, the fact remains that our students' abilities are diverse. Even though the numbers that are said to represent placement (and, by implication, ability) give us a generalized view of the street, they often have little to no bearing on real students' writing, except to reiterate the diversity in their abilities. I've seen first-quarter basic writers turn out essays at the level of their peers who happened to test into college-level freshman composition. And I've seen developing writers test into freshman composition.

So, in the game of "Who Knows What We're Talking About?" this is who we're talking about: a diverse student population whose multiple perspectives are wonderfully layered and individual, and who, when validated, are willing to invite us onto their streets. But we don't want to change their streets; we want to show them that their streets will, in fact, connect to the text, to academic discourse. And to do this we must be comfortable with the idea that a center exists just where it exists for each student individually, which is also to say we must be comfortable with what we do *not* know. As Lynn Quitman Troyka put it in "Defining Basic Writing in Context,"

> We need [. . .] to avoid thinking that the writing processes of a few [. . .] writers appl[ies] to all [. . .]. We must start instead to describe with example our student populations when we write about [them]. We must qualify our observations and thereby contribute to a fluid, creative exploration of what we do and how we can do it better. Simply put, we must return to [Mina] Shaughnessy's tradition of talking about not only what we know but also what we do not. (13)

Again, drawing upon the model of student-centered teaching offered by David Bartholomae, one way to do this is to allow "students to experience the possibilities for contextualizing a given writing situation in their own terms, terms that would allow them to initiate and participate in the process by which they and their subject are transformed" ("Teaching Basic Writing" 87). Laura Rendón, in her essay "Validating Culturally

Diverse Students," says that we must develop student-centered pedagogies that focus, not so much on the location of the center, but that affirm, support, enable, and reinforce students' capacities to fully develop themselves as students and as individuals (45). And, borrowing once more from another scholar in this field, Antonia Darder writes, "Herein lies one of the most important goals for a [student-centered] pedagogy [as the faces of our students continue to change]: creating the conditions for the voices of difference to find their way to the center of the dialogical process, rather than to remain forever silent or at the fringes of American classroom life" (136). As we refigure a center in our diverse student-centered classrooms, we should embrace this goal as our first priority, as our greatest responsibility.

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The Changing Faces of Student-Centered Teaching: Refiguring the Center

FIGURE 1

U.S. Census Bureau, 2000	California	USA
White persons, not of Hispanic/Latino origin	46.7%	69.1%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin (b)	32.4%	12.5%
Asian persons (a)	10.9%	3.6%
Black or African American persons (a)	6.7%	12.3%

(a) Includes persons reporting only one race
(b) Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories

U.S. Census Bureau. "State and County *QuickFacts*. California, 2000." 7 February 2002 <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html>

FIGURE 2

Fall 1997 Student Enrollment by Ethnicity for 4-year and 2-year Degree Granting Higher Education Institutions within the United States

White, non-Hispanic	70.8%
Black, non-Hispanic	10.7%
Hispanic	8.4%
Asian or Pacific Islander	5.9%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1.0%
Nonresident alien	3.2%

U.S. Department of Education. "Total Fall Enrollment in Institutions of Higher Education and Degree-Granting Institutions, by Type and Control of Institution and Race/Ethnicity." July 1999. National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey. 8 March 2002 <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/Digest99/d99t209.html>

FIGURE 3

Fall 2000 Student Enrollment by Ethnicity within the CSU System

African American	7%
American Indian	1%
Asian American	15.3%
Filipino	5.1%
Hispanic	23.8%
Pacific Islander	0.5%
White	47.2%

(Only 83.1% of CSU enrollment are identified in these figures.)

Student Enrollment at the CSU. Fall 2000. The California State University. 8 March 2002 <http://www.calstate.edu/PA/Info/enroll.shtml>

FIGURE 4

Fall 2000 Student Enrollment by Ethnicity at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

African American	3.8%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.6%
Asian American	30.6%
Filipino	7.6%
Hispanic	26.0%
Other Pacific Islander	0.4%
White, Non-Latino	31.0%

(Based on self-reported ethnicity. Figures are total identified and do not include nonresident aliens and others.)

Just the Facts: California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. Fall 2000. Institutional Research and Planning. 8 March 2002 <http://www.csupomona.edu/~irp>.

FIGURE 5

English Placement Test score of 151 or higher	➡➡	eligible for Freshman English I
English Placement Test score of 142-150	➡➡	eligible for Basic Communication Skills II
English Placement Test score of less than 142	➡➡	eligible for Basic Communication Skills I